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In *Hollywood's Dirtiest Secret: The Hidden Environmental Costs of the Movies*, Hunter Vaughan argues for the necessity of new forms of production and spectatorship that are attentive to the environmental degradation caused by Hollywood filmmaking. Each chapter focuses on one of the earth’s elements—Fire, Water, Wind and Earth—with a final chapter dedicated to analysis of the ‘Fifth Element’—humanity—which ‘has imposed itself… at once within and increasingly at odds with the stability and health of our planet’s ecosystems’ (p. 165). Vaughan’s book is persuasive, developing detailed textual analyses and new ways of conceptualising the materiality of film that assert the need to question fundamental conceptions of how celluloid and digital productions contribute to ongoing ecological disaster. But while the book’s filmic analysis is astute, it is hampered by a reluctance to ground these insights within an anticolonial understanding of the infrastructures of climate crisis. By framing key arguments around European Enlightenment constructions of humanity and the world, the book struggles to analyse ecodisaster in terms of a global conjuncture.

*Hollywood’s Dirtiest Secret* is at its strongest when scrutinising the multi-layered webs of ecological and environmental destruction, developing the concept of “ecomaterialism”, which “explores the material environmental impact of film practices… the centrality of natural symbolism in its marketing and crossover merchandising, and the restructuring of urban communities based on production culture ebbs and flows” (p. 13). This analysis of the conversion of the material world into screen-spectacle is constructed through a combination of insights from environmental science, archaeology and what Vaughan terms, “Frankfurt School dialectical materialism” (although he does not delineate in detail what he means by this) (pp.12-3). The book uncovers film’s intrinsic materiality through the lens of ecology. Chapter One—on Fire—explores the explosive instability of early celluloid and the cinematographic apparatus, suggesting that film is “by nature destructive of its own fabric”, a self-immolatory substance designed around destruction. Extending this physical critique across the four elements, Vaughan denigrates the profligate practices of washing celluloid film—Kodak used 12 million gallons of water daily in the 1920s (p. 72)—and mass digital waste disposal (p. 139). This is key, pressing the reader to reconsider the fundamental tenets of filmic materiality and our relationships to it. Is the film archivist’s gaze, as Wolfgang Ernst terms it, always so “cold”?, or might it be more fiery? (Parikka 2012: 8). Might Vaughan’s ontologising of the burning image violently recast Philip Rosen’s cool description of film-as-petrification—“change mummified”—alternatively re-envisioning cinema
as a process of cremation, “chemically primed to dematerialise” (p. 33), which disappears the traces of its own destruction as it records (Rosen 2001)? Yes, cinema “fossilises light” (p. 128)—it can store and preserve—but it also consumes, supernova-like, while, as Vaughan comments witheringly, marketing schemes, production companies and audiences celebrate the spectacle of excess.

If filmmaking always tends toward destruction, Vaughan’s deep dives into Hollywood practices and archives reveal cultures of production that exacerbate this fundamental propensity to monumental levels, building a chronological case to show exponential increase over time—an arc of devastation that curves higher with the switch from celluloid to digital and shifts to immaterial forms of labour. Case studies are central to his argument and are a major strength of the book. The escape from Atlanta in Gone With The Wind (Victor Fleming, USA, 1939) was achieved by burning the spent carcasses of old film sets to produce a hundred-foot-high conflagration (p. 46); the ‘rain’ in Singin’ In The Rain’s (Stanley Donan and Gene Kelley, USA, 1952) was produced by draining local water supplies (p. 83). A study of Twister (Jan de Bont, USA, 1996) brings this ecomaterialist analysis to bear on CGI and the digital turn. Debunking the myth of waste-free virtual productions, Vaughn details how the film impacted the natural environment via huge lighting rigs, industrial ice chippers, jet engines and the destruction of housing in Oklahoma (a hint at systemic land expropriation, which I wish was explored in more detail) (p. 121). Vaughn’s greatest ire is reserved for the self-aggrandising paradoxes of Avatar (James Cameron, USA, 2009), which undermines its surface level eco-rhetoric with the expenditure of massive energy supplies for CGI and digital processing (p. 161). The book depicts the long shadow cast by each instance of irresponsibility, as cinematic artifice engenders a reproductive cycle of bigger and better spectaculars, an industry defined by pushing the boundaries of destructive possibility.

Vaughan builds dense evidentiary claims but is also attentive to the difficulties of depicting less spectacular processes of ecological harm, or those that might be invisible on-screen, absent from production archives, or not immediately verifiable. This mixing is important: Vaughan cites a 2006 Southern California Environmental Report to illustrate the pollution and greenhouse gases produced by the Los Angeles film industry (p. 101), but supplements his empirical findings with an ecomaterialist sensibility—a sense of political commitment that at times transforms his writing into a manifesto. Vaughan’s ecomaterialist gaze is both a mode of looking that connects diffuse cultural and economic articulations to show the wider web of complicity between spectacle and ecodisaster, and a way of seeing that entails a commitment to deconstructing an easy reliance on subject-object relations, in which Man dominates Nature. To do this, Vaughan first shows how fire, wind, earth and water are converted, physically, into cinematic spectacle, and then he subjects
these images to critical and semiological examination. Thus, *Singin In The Rain*’s aquatic excesses are connected to an analysis of Anthropocentric concepts of nature: rivers must be tamed and dammed. Readings of archetypal ecodisaster plots (*Avatar, The Day After Tomorrow*, Roland Emmerich, USA, 2004) highlight conventions in which natural disaster is prevented by either a ‘Scientist Hero’ or a ‘Visionary Explorer’ (p. 93), rather than through collective climate action, representational traditions that constrain political common sense. Pulling on many conceptual threads allows Vaughan to develop an ecomaterialist critique that is empirical but not reductive, staying close to Stuart Hall’s prescription for conducting a relational analysis of material life through inter-connecting concepts (here, climate, capital and consumption) through a process that “retains the concrete empirical reference as a privileged and undissolved ‘moment’ within a theoretical analysis without thereby making it ‘empiricist’: the concrete analysis of a concrete situation” (Hall 2003: 128).

Unfortunately, the critical reach of *Hollywood’s Dirtiest Secret* is hampered by a reliance on the explanatory device of the “sociocultural contract”, used to describe the connections between Hollywood and audiences, “whereby we collectively agree to convert material reality into destruction spectacle” (p. 26). Developed out of a reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s social contract theory, Vaughan understands this as “the compromise individuals make to preserve order in collective society”, extending it towards cinematic culture to refer “to the unspoken agreement made within a society as to how it will produce and value cultural attitudes, behaviors, customs, and materiality” (p. 16). Various problems arise from this approach. Firstly, Vaughan omits to reflect on the awkwardness of employing a Eurocentric concept to describe the totalising effects of a global climate crisis, which risks flattening essential considerations of who and how ecocrises affect most. Rousseau’s concept is profoundly hierarchical, and, as Errol Henderson has analysed, is at root a “racial contract” that organises conceptions of humanity around a “dualism demarcated by race” (Henderson 2014: 28). This conceptual history means that the ‘social’ of the sociocultural contract is problematically constructed. As Gurminder K. Bhambra argues incisively, Enlightenment and Frankfurt School concepts of the social must be rethought because, “the social under consideration is straightforwardly seen as the ‘modern social’, where modernity is presented as the outcome of endogenous processes of European history”, obscuring colonial histories and imperial epistemological genealogies (Bhambra 2021: 77). The fundamental stratifications nested within the concept of the “contract”, thus make it a politically problematic basis from which to articulate a politics of change and to “reframe the priorities of our screen culture” (p. 2). This also leads to a difficulty in conceptualising, philosophically and strategically, what might come next. Vaughan suggests that we “renegotiate” the contract (p. 3), but a critique of Enlightenment
thought suggests that something more radical is needed. Reckoning with the ways that climate disaster is produced, it is not enough to propose an additive formulation—Rousseau plus colonial narratives—but instead to demand a rethinking of the canon of political economy and its use in film studies. Anticolonial interventions like Huey P. Newton’s “Reactionary Intercommunalism”, which connects the domestic oppression of Black Americans with US imperialism, describes more directly than Rousseau the hierarchical relationships inscribed into the forms of Hollywood industry, cinema audiences and globally stratified systems of material extraction (Narayan 2017: 58). Vaughan’s reading is often anticolonial, weaving critiques of post-Renaissance social theory into his central thesis (p. 9). But the Enlightenment parameters of the book obscure how the ecomaterialist gaze must be decolonising too, blunting the force of an otherwise totalising critique.

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**Bibliography**


